

**For information on
9 February 2009**

Legislative Council Panel on Health Services
**Progress Report on Promoting Healthy Eating
among School Children**

PURPOSE

This paper reports on the progress made in promoting healthy eating habit among primary school students.

BACKGROUND

2. Childhood obesity¹ poses a growing threat to public health and creates significant socioeconomic burden to society. According to the Student Health Service of the Department of Health (DH), there is a rising trend of obesity among primary school students, from 16.2% in the 1995-96 academic year to 21.3% in the 2007-08 academic year. There is a tendency for obese children to remain obese in adulthood. Evidence shows that obesity carries considerable health costs by doubling the risk of all-cause mortality, coronary heart disease, stroke and diabetes. It also increases the risk of cancers, musculoskeletal problems and loss of function, and has negative psychological impact.

3. To promote healthy eating among primary school students for combating childhood obesity and to reduce children's risks of developing non-communicable diseases, DH launched the "EatSmart@school.hk" Campaign in all primary schools in Hong Kong since the 2006-07 academic year. The Campaign was drawn up having regard to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s health promotion principles and its "Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health". Key objectives of the Campaign are to raise public awareness and concern about healthy eating among children, and to create an environment that is conducive to healthy eating in schools and the community.

¹ The definition of overweight, including obesity, is body weight greater than 120% of the median weight for height.

4. The Administration briefed the Panel on the aim, approach and strategies of the Campaign in January 2006, followed by the progress of implementation in January 2007. We also briefed Members on the promotion of healthy eating in restaurants in January 2008.

DETAILS AND PROGRESS OF THE CAMPAIGN

5. Since the launch of the Campaign in the 2006-07 academic year, DH has, in collaboration with stakeholders, introduced a number of measures targeting at schools and the community at large. Some of the major initiatives are highlighted below.

(a) Empowerment of parents and teachers

6. DH has launched a training programme known as “School NutriAgent Project” (SNAP) since October 2006 to provide training and professional advice to parents and teachers on nutritional knowledge so as to equip them with simple and practical tools to support students’ healthy eating habits. Under SNAP, participating schools are required to formulate a healthy eating school policy and organize activities to promote healthy eating. In the 2008-09 academic year, 219 primary schools (representing about 36% of all primary schools) enrolled in SNAP. Participating schools indicated that the Project had successfully raised their self-efficacy, confidence and capacity in promoting healthy eating among their students. To strengthen the impact of this empowerment project, DH extended SNAP to other district-based organizations which serve children, youths and women in 2008, and has provided training to some 300 social workers and volunteers in nutritional knowledge and skills.

7. In addition, DH has developed a series of interactive learning resources for use in schools, which included interactive games for students, teaching kits for teachers, animated educational video on school lunch and snacks as well as other educational materials. As at end 2008, the dedicated website for the Campaign records a total of over 40 million hits.

(b) Creation of a supportive environment

8. DH issued the “Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students” and the “Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students” (the “Nutritional Guidelines”) to all primary schools, parent-teacher associations, school lunchbox suppliers, tuck

shops, etc. in 2006. These guidelines, which have also been incorporated in circulars and guidelines issued by the Education Bureau (EDB), serve as important reference on the nutritional quality of food served in schools. Besides, DH has invited lunchbox suppliers to make available information on their ability and willingness to supply lunchboxes that meet the above nutritional requirements. So far, some 35 lunchbox suppliers have provided DH with such information which has been uploaded onto the Campaign's dedicated website (<http://www.eatsmart.gov.hk>). This enhances transparency and helps schools and parents consider the appropriate lunchbox suppliers.

9. To maintain regular dialogue and facilitate collaboration among parties concerned, DH established a Working Group in July 2007 comprising licensed lunchbox suppliers, relevant government departments, schools, parent-teacher associations, etc. to discuss and exchange views on preparing healthy, delicious and nutritious lunches and snacks for students. Customised training was given to chefs to help them prepare nutritious school meals in accordance with the Nutritional Guidelines.

10. Beyond the school setting, DH launched the "EatSmart@restaurant.hk" Campaign in April 2008 to encourage and assist restaurants to provide dishes with more fruit and vegetables and less oil, salt and sugar. The objective is to allow more healthy food choices for children and the general public when eating out. Under the Campaign, participating restaurants are required to make available at least five "EatSmart dishes" every day, including those with "More Fruit and Vegetables"² and "3 Less"³. At the close of 2008, over 470 restaurants have participated in the Campaign.

(c) Promotion of physical activity

11. To cultivate the habit of regular exercise for physical fitness, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has organised the "School Sports Programme" in collaboration with EDB since 2001 to provide training in sports and relevant information for children and youngsters studying at primary, secondary and special schools. In the 2007-08 academic year, over 1 000 schools and 540 000 students participated in the programme. EDB has also provided support to schools for developing sports activities through provision of grants for acquiring sports equipment and hiring of services to promote co-curricular

² "More Fruit and Vegetables" dishes are those that have only vegetables and fruit as ingredients or where portions of vegetables and fruit are more than twice of that of meat.

³ "3 Less" are those dishes that are cooked or prepared with less fat or oil, salt and sugar.

sports activities; collaboration with other government departments and organisations to arrange for priority use of public sports facilities by schools free of charge or at concessionary rates; and organising large-scale sports development programmes, such as the “School Physical Fitness Award Schemes”, “School Dance Festival”, “Outdoor Education Camps”, “Jump Rope for Heart” and inter-school sports competitions. The total number of students participating in various sports programmes jointly organised by EDB, LCSD and other organisations amounted to over 1.1 million in the 2007-08 academic year.

(d) Publicity

12. In the last two school years, DH conducted over 390 briefing sessions for and visits to dietary professionals, principals’ associations, schools, parent groups, organizations that run schools, District Councils, and lunch suppliers. Three Announcements of Public Interest on healthy lunches, snacks and promotion of fruit consumption have been aired on television and radio so far. Other promotional efforts included an alliance building ceremony, an inter-school slogan and e-card design competition, the annual Fruit Day, as well as healthy cooking competitions. Activities of the Campaign were covered by the media. Some 190 media reports were recorded.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

13. The “EatSmart@school.hk” Campaign has received over-whelming support from the school sector. In the 2007-08 academic year, a total of 482 primary schools participated in the Campaign, accounting for 77% of primary schools in Hong Kong. To better understand the childhood obesity problem and its underlying factors, and to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions, DH has conducted 13 research projects including qualitative and quantitative research on knowledge, attitude and practices of students and parents, SNAP user opinion surveys, exploratory studies on schools not participating in SNAP, and user feedback on nutritional guidelines on lunch and snacks. The findings have provided useful information for the strategic planning and implementation of the Campaign.

14. In particular, DH conducted a study titled “Assessment of Dietary Pattern in Primary Schools” in January 2008 to evaluate the effectiveness of the Campaign. The Study aims at gaining insight into the changes in school environment, awareness, knowledge and attitude towards healthy

eating, as well as eating behaviour among students and parents as a result of the Campaign. A total of 51 primary schools participated in the Study and questionnaires were sent to over 11 000 Primary Four and Five students and their parents. The response rates for students and parents were 82% and 74% respectively. Key findings of the Study are set out below.

(a) School environment

15. About 53% of the surveyed primary schools indicated that they had established a healthy eating school policy. Among them, 85% covered lunch, 63% covered snacks and 26% covered healthy eating at home. For schools with lunch provision on-site, 79% had established a dedicated working group to handle matters relating to the arrangement and monitoring of catering services for students.

(b) Awareness

16. Over 90% of the surveyed schools indicated that they were aware of the Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students issued by DH, and 62% of the schools which served lunch on-site had incorporated nutritional requirements in their contracts with lunchbox suppliers. On the other hand, more than half of the responding students and parents were aware of the “EatSmart@school.hk” Campaign.

(c) Knowledge

17. The Study revealed that primary students generally had good knowledge about the principles of healthy eating. For example, over 90% of the respondents could point out healthier options from among six food pairs; 87% knew that at least five servings of fruits and vegetables were required every day for prevention of chronic diseases; and more than 70% knew the recommended 3:2:1 proportion of food groups of grains and cereals, vegetables and meat in a lunchbox.

(d) Attitude

18. The percentage of students and parents who paid attention to the nutritional value of food when making food choices had increased over that in 2006 (8% and 6.4% increase respectively over the 2006 findings). There was a prevailing sentiment among parents that schools should be actively engaged in healthy eating promotion and that suppliers should ensure that food served to children is beneficial to health. About 68% of

the responding parents supported specifying the amount of healthy food items in school meals; and 92% suggested limiting the frequency of providing unhealthy food items in school meals. Although few parents (8%) actually participated in healthy eating promotional activities in schools, they indicated strong support for healthy eating promotion to be carried out in the school setting. Parents also expressed the wish to receive more information on food, nutrition and healthy eating.

(e) Eating behaviour

19. The Survey findings indicated that the proportion of students consuming a healthier diet had increased when compared with the findings in 2006. For instance, 78.7% students consumed vegetables at least twice daily (2.3% increase) ; besides, in the week preceding the survey, 14.8% students did not take food high in fat (1.1% increase), 27.3% students did not take food high in salt (2.7% increase), 12.2% students did not take food high in sugar (1.5% increase) and 10.8% students did not take drinks with added sugar (2% increase).

WAY FORWARD

20. The findings of the evaluation study demonstrate that the “EatSmart@school.hk” Campaign has increased the awareness of students, parents and schools of the importance of healthy eating and has facilitated the creation of an environment conducive to healthy eating in schools. Nonetheless, to bring about a greater and more lasting effect on the healthy eating habits of children, DH sees a need to strengthen healthy eating promotion for children from birth to 12 years of age by making use of the lifecourse approach. In this regard, DH will strengthen its support to parents on infant feeding practices, work with the pre-primary educational sector to build a learning environment more conducive to healthy lifestyle development, intensify support to primary schools and stakeholder groups under the umbrella of the “EatSmart@school.hk” Campaign, strengthen parental education and empowerment, and advocate healthy policies and practices in settings relevant to children’s development in the years ahead.

21. To call for concerted efforts in the control and prevention of non-communicable diseases and the risk factors (including overweight), DH has launched the “Strategic Framework for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases” in October 2008. A Steering Committee on Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases was set up in October 2008, comprising representatives from the Government, public and private sectors, academia, professional bodies, relevant industries and

other key partners, to deliberate on and oversee the implementation of the overall strategy. A working group has been formed under the Steering Committee to study specifically matters related to healthy eating and physical activity. One of its main duties is to consider conducting studies on childhood obesity so as to collect more scientific data for following up cases of childhood obesity.

22. DH will continue to monitor the changes of school children's eating habits and the trend of childhood obesity rate, and conduct relevant research to review and improve the strategies and measures for promoting healthy eating.

23. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

Food and Health Bureau
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